



Discussion Topic

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GIVING THE GOVERNMENT HEALTH CARE PLAN THE HEIMLICH MANEUVER

The U.S. government, at least in its current manifestation, is concerned about what will happen if it does nothing about health care. Many citizens, at least the healthy ones, are concerned about what will happen if the government does something about health care. And so the national debate has begun over a government plan that most lawmakers haven't read, much less comprehended. A plan even fewer citizens will ever hope to understand is leading to increasingly partisan shouting matches in Congress's home districts.

One thing is perfectly clear, however. Farm Bureau national policy, forged from the nation's county Farm Bureaus on up, states "We oppose compulsory national health insurance and a national health plan in any form."

"Doesn't get much clearer than that, does it?" asks Ryan Findlay, national lobbyist with Michigan Farm Bureau. So why has the Michigan Farm Bureau not condemned the current proposal, a mishmash of five different plans sloppily concealed amid more than 1,000 pages of legalese? "Because we're still trying to influence it," Findlay said. "The language being used to craft this legislation is still fluid, and we want to be sure that farmers are protected." Protected from poor health care or from a poor health care insurance plan? "Exactly," Findlay said.

If, as some members of Congress would have their constituents believe, health care in the United States is inadequate, perhaps we need to define terms, he said. "Government angst over health care is generally not about quality of care. Most people trust their doctors and hospitals to give them 100 percent effort every day, using their skills and compassion to the best of their abilities. The angst is over making sure everyone in the United States has health care." And so the debate, in reality, isn't about fixing health care. It's about fixing health care's finances.

That's why Farm Bureau members - mostly small businesses who cannot bear many more costs - must be protected against plans that would bankrupt them by forcing them, for example, to offer expensive health care plans for seasonal workers. And when it comes to farmers buying health insurance for themselves, Findlay said he and his colleagues are fighting to be sure there are tax credits or other plans in place to be sure they can afford to buy their own, absent an employer-provided plan.

"We also want to see a plan that encourages doctors to serve in rural areas," he said. "Many rural communities around the nation are woefully underserved by health care professionals."

So far, Findlay said, arguments in Congress have focused mainly on moving key principles about health care forward. But the details, which may include a co-operative option or a flat-out government-runs-it-all plan, are where public faith in the government to carry out an effective system is lost.

"The present system is far from perfect," Findlay said, "but we'd better be careful about allowing the government to take anything over, because when the government drives out the private insurers, by sheer size it can undercut all other plans. Then it may be forced to reduce the health care that's available. And that's a scenario that no one wants to see."

QUESTIONS

1. How can your county Farm Bureau influence Congress to slow down and develop a plan that will work for the entire country? Is it possible to have a workable "one size fits all" plan?
2. What is the best health-care plan for farmers? A co-op system, a government-run system or let the free market decide?
3. Why is there so little confidence in the government's ability to run a national health-care plan? Give examples.

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